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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL MNUC ENRG EINV KNNP MASS IN

SUBJECT: MUKHERJEE AGAIN UNDERLINES VALUE OF US-INDIA

DEFENSE COOPERATION

REF: A. NEW DELHI 6011

B. NEW DELHI 6079

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In an otherwise uneventful August 8 Parliamentary debate on the US-India Defense Framework, Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee signaled strong support for burgeoning Indo-American military ties. Mukherjee responded to politically motivated BJP complaints and the usual litany of anti-American Communist ideology with a 30-minute speech reinforcing the advantages of US-India defense cooperation. Stressing that the GOI will never give up its ability to make sovereign decisions, he argued that India must not ignore its emerging defense requirements and the benefits inherent in acquiring advanced American equipment. END SUMMARY.

RELAX, YOU NERVOUS NELLIES

¶2. (SBU) Mukherjee expressed his surprise at the political and media spotlight on the Defense Framework Agreement, which he described as "a broad outline of the Indo-US defense relationship." Allaying Communists concerns about possible additional US demands on the Indian military, he assured the Parliament that "how this broad outline will actually translate into reality will depend on what we want and what the US wants." Mukherjee criticized some MPs for having a "complex" about the US and recalled the Congress party's historical role in maintaining an independent foreign policy.

BESIDES, LOOK WHAT'S IN IT FOR US

¶3. (SBU) Moving on to the advantages of the agreement, Mukherjee highlighted its role as an "enabling provision" for the Indian military. He added that "to what extent this enabling provision will be advantageous to us will depend on what extent we take advantage of it and to what extent (America) responds." He also emphasized how defense procurement from the US would open up opportunities for the Indian military. Mukherjee called it his "bounded duty" to "explore the possibilities to have the technology which will equip (India) to meet its requirements. To those who questioned the dependability of the US as a military supplier, he commented that if India "has access to technology," then it has "enough brain and competence" to "absorb and improve it."

COMMENT: MUKHERJEE PUTS THE US-INDIA DEBATE TO BED

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: After a surprisingly vociferous debate in the press upon Mukherjee's return to India, deepened strategic ties with the US are now old news. The Lok Sabha statements were relatively stale, most likely because the signing was over a month ago and the parties got their concerns off their chests in the recent debates over the PM's US visit (Reftels). Mumbai floods, Gurgaon labor unrest, cricket and the Nanavati report on the 1984 Sikh riots pushed the debate to the back pages of the newspapers. The UPA did a good job of tactically delaying this floor debate until even the BJP opposition was bored enough simply to go through the motions of a token protest. In this context, as our MEA interlocutors pointed out, Mukherjee's statement was notable mainly for his strong endorsement of the advantages that India can acquire through defense purchases from the US. END COMMENT.

BLAKE